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UNITED STATES GENERAL ACCOUNTING OFFICE  
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20548

FOR RELEASE ON DELIVERY  
EXPECTED AT 3:30 p.m.  
November 29, 1979



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Statement of  
Elmer B. Staats  
Comptroller General of the United States  
before the  
Committee on Rules  
House of Representatives  
on

H 1300

H.R. 5858, the Sunset Review Act of 1979

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:

We are pleased to appear before you to express our views on improving congressional oversight. My statement today will be very brief, since my colleagues and I have had several opportunities to present our views and suggestions on this and related topics.

In the past few months, we have considered and commented on many proposals for improving congressional and administrative decisionmaking and control processes, including sunset, sunrise, legislative veto, regulatory reform, grant reform, debt ceiling, multiple year authorization and funding for research and development, and prevention of fraud and abuse.

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In each of these presentations we focused on the particular reform being considered. But there are several common threads which have kept reappearing, and which underly our views on this entire area. In summary, we believe that the Congress, the Executive, and ultimately the Nation must strive to:

- (1) think, debate, and act with a much longer time horizon in mind, recognizing that the full implications of policies will often not be felt for several years or even decades;
- (2) focus more of its analysis, debate and actions on broad policy areas and groups of interrelated programs;
- (3) make a greater effort to analyze the effects of policy changes before they are enacted, along the lines indicated in Senate Rule 29.5;
- (4) be more specific and realistic when establishing goals and expectations for policies, programs, and administrative reforms;
- (5) provide administrators the authority and resources needed to make the realization of such goals and expectations plausible, or revise them to fit the available resources or degree of authority granted;
- (6) establish evaluation and reporting procedures which provide policy officials clear statements by the administrators on the performance of the

programs and activities for which they are accountable;  
and

(7) take prompt action to make changes when needed.

In actual implementation of even the best designed decisionmaking and control processes, the key element is the commitment of the leaders and participants to the goals of the reform. New laws cannot create this commitment. New laws can only create mechanisms and procedures which will permit the commitment to be translated into action as efficiently and systematically as possible.

In the case of reforming the congressional oversight process, I believe this commitment exists, and that H.R. 5858, the proposed "Sunset Review Act of 1979," would create the kind of mechanisms and procedures necessary for this commitment to be translated into improved congressional oversight.

This bill represents, in our view, an improvement over earlier sunset bills. It is consistent with our ideas and we hope that it is acted upon favorably. We think the revisions made to the earlier bills as embodied in H.R. 5858 would reduce the possibility of overloading the oversight and legislative capabilities of the Congress. A most attractive feature of the new bill is its emphasis on review, rather than reauthorization and automatic program termination. In our view, improved program review is a critical element of oversight reform. It will improve the

information and analysis of programs which must be developed and reported to the Congress if it is to act responsibly on proposals to continue, modify or terminate programs. Given H.R. 5858's emphasis on program review, it--when compared to earlier bills--is less likely to create unrealistic expectations as to what oversight reform can achieve, while it is more likely to result in the kind of selective, intensive oversight needed for making major policy and program improvements, which may involve occasional termination of programs.

As we have suggested on other occasions, most recently in testimony before the Subcommittee on Rules of the House, there are many ways for the Congress to achieve better oversight and accountability. To improve the effectiveness of the oversight process, however, the Congress will have to make more effective use of available opportunities and resources available to it and focus those resources on the policy issues which it must decide. These opportunities occur when the Congress enacts legislation, when agencies design programs and promulgate rules and regulations, and when information and analysis on program effectiveness is developed and reported to the Congress. Legislation along the lines of H.R. 5858 could represent a major step toward accomplishing this objective.

My colleagues and I appreciate the close working relationship we have had with your committee concerning the

development of this bill, and we would be pleased to continue assisting you in any way we can. We have a few minor suggestions which we will be happy to provide to your staff.

That concludes my prepared remarks, and my colleagues and I would be pleased to answer any questions you may have.